DISCOVERING JESUS

BY WILLIAM G. BALLANTINE

Translator of
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By

WILLIAM G. BALLANTINE

Author of "The Young Man from Jerusalem" and "Understanding the Bible" and Translator of "The Riverside New Testament"

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FOREWORD

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How can one learn the religion of Jesus? The old answer was, "Just read the New Testament."

To our grandfathers the New Testament was a single complete and harmonious account of the origin of Christianity. Every verse of it was the word of God and equally authoritative and infallible with every other verse.

But science has given to us of the 20th century new instruments and methods of research. In surgery the first step now is to put x-rays through the living body of the patient and make photographs of his interior. In the field of literature and history something similar has happened. Criticism has given to our minds a perspi-

cacity like that of the x-ray machine. In reading the New Testament we cannot avoid seeing its internal structure. Wonderful as the book is, it is plainly a collection of such naïve and discordant reports and interpretations of Jesus as were possible to unscientific minds near the close of the first century. Only by the hardest kind of thinking can we penetrate these interpretations to the realities that lie beneath them—realities more sublime than any one of those writers could fully comprehend.

Fellow truth-seeker, you are invited in this little book to share in a candid examination of what many regard as the heart of the Bible—the Gospel of St. John. The traditional belief is that it was written by one of the original Galilean disciples, one of the three most intimate with Jesus. But to many thoughtful scholars that view has now become un-

tenable. They cannot see how any close associate could have written an account so different from the first three gospels, nor can they see how any Galilean fisherman could have become so steeped in mystical philosophy.

The book does not name John as its author. It professes to come from "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This title, which would have been immodest if used by the author to describe himself, seems to have been chosen by him for the imaginary writer of his narrative. The Jews saw no wrong in attributing new books to famous men of the past. The Old Testament has such books bearing the names of Moses, Solomon, and Daniel although written centuries after those great men were dead.

The purpose of our investigation is intensely practical. If eternal life is "to know the only true God and him whom

he has sent," then nothing can be more important than to evaluate rightly the books that profess to tell about Jesus. If this gospel contains any claims that Jesus did not make or any doctrines that he did not teach, we are deeply concerned to know it.

My own strong conviction is that down through all the Christian centuries the radiant personality of Jesus and his simple and beautiful message have been obscured by the fogs of theology which loyal disciples, with the best intentions, have raised around him. The scattering of these fogs, far from involving a loss, must be the first step in unveiling the full splendor of the Light of the World.

DISCOVERING JESUS

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I

"COLUMBUS discovered America," we tell the children. But we do not tell them that Columbus himself never knew it. We do not say that Columbus never expected to do more than to find for Europeans an easier way to old India and that to the last day of his life he never suspected that he had done more.

He had disclosed to mankind a fresh, unspoiled world on whose boundless and fertile expanses the crushed hopes of the race might have a new birth in liberty. But that thought never entered his mind. The sublime thing that he had really done immeasurably transcended all that he

ever fancied he had done. Therefore the journals of Columbus are little studied by students who wish to understand America. For when the great admiral set sail from Palos his tiny caravels were loaded to the gunwales with an immense cargo of theories inherited from the childish past, and his journals are largely concerned with identifying what he found with what he expected to find.

Naturally, in accordance with his expectations, he called the natives of this continent *Indians,* and that misleading name has clung to them ever since. Every time that we say *West Indies,* in speaking of Cuba, Hayti, Jamaica and the rest of those islands, we are reminded that the great discoverer did not know what he had discovered.

There is nothing discreditable to Columbus in this. A great general law of all discovery finds here another striking

illustration. Man advancing out of the shadows of the partly known into the darkness of the wholly unknown inevitably interprets what he finds by the dim notions that he brings along. No wonder that mental confusion is often worse confounded.

II

WHAT happened at the discovery of America, happened inevitably at the discovery of Jesus. Men interpreted him and his new spiritual world by the notions on hand. What else could they do?

Harm came from the mistakes of Columbus, but it was slight and transient. Other bold explorers were not kept from pushing on, and soon Europe was made aware of the absolute newness and the richness of the western paradise. But in religion the baneful idea of infallibility always springs up like an icy wind to freeze and fix thought. What the first discoverers have imagined is accepted by their followers as the final "Word of God." Exploration stops. And so, since

the first generation, Jesus has been looked on by his followers as a Jewish Messiah or as a Hindoo Incarnation, and Christianity has turned out to be largely a new way to old Judæa or to old India!

III

THE first man to attempt a "Life of Christ" was Mark. His little booklet, which he called "The Good News," makes less than forty pages of ordinary type and tells merely some incidents of the public activity of Jesus and some of the circumstances of his tragic death. All of the events that Mark tells might have happened in a little more than a year, and the scene is confined to the neighborhood of the Lake of Galilee until, less than a week from the end, it is transferred to Jerusalem.

Nothing is told of Jesus' birth or of his early life except that he had been a carpenter of Nazareth and had lived there with his mother, Mary, his four brothers,

James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, and two or more sisters whose names are not given. Nothing is said of any supposed reappearances after his death; but the last page of the original gospel was soon lost and we can only guess what information it may have recorded.

Mark thought that what he had to tell proved that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Fortunately, that was for Mark a conclusion, not a premise. He had received from eyewitnesses stories of actual historic incidents, and these he repeated with all possible fidelity. With child-like simplicity he gives us priceless jewels of thought just as they fell from the great teacher's lips. Here we have the eternal verities of religion in the briefest and clearest statements ever crystallized by any thinker. With amazement and delight we seize on them.

Mark's gospel has a very slight plan.

It is a string of anecdotes. In his narrative each incident leads Jesus to make a remark or explanation which puts some great principle of religion into such a light as never was before on sea or land, and which opens to view a new world of liberty and reasonableness and hope and joy such as had never before been dreamed of by any philosopher or prophet. And these facts led Mark to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

IV.

THE idea of the Messiah was a vague one. Among the ancient Hebrews every high official was inducted into office by the ceremony of anointing, that is, pouring olive oil on his head. After that ceremony he was an anointed one—in their language "a Messiah"—whether he was a prophet, a priest, or a king. But the title oftenest suggested a king.

When Hebrew ceased to be a living language, and the Jews in the wide regions of western Asia and northern Africa ruled by Alexander the Great and his successors took up with the rest of the world the use of Greek, the Hebrew word Messiah gave place to the Greek word Christ, which has the same mean-

ing. In speaking of Saul and David and all their other ancient kings, the Greek-speaking Jews called each of them in turn "the Christ" of his time.

Nearly six hundred years before the Christian era Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian conqueror, had crushed the little kingdom of Judæa, and since that date no king of David's line had sat on his throne. But the Jews, with a passionate devotion characteristic of that unconquerable race, had clung to the faith that in some golden future day a Messiah, a Christ, a king of David's line, would arise and reëstablish the throne and make the Jews the rulers of the world. He would, of course, have ideal moral virtues; but he was pictured as a war-lord, a "man on horseback," trampling down his foes. The book of Revelation preserves for us this picture of the Napoleonic Christ riding at the head of his

armies on a white horse splashed with the blood of "the grapes of wrath."

To the first generation of Christians, who were mainly Jews, the identification of Jesus of Nazareth with this hoped-for national hero was the most important article of the new religion. Peter and Paul proved it by far-fetched arguments from misunderstood texts of the Old Testament, and noble inquirers like those in Berœa searched the Scriptures, found the references and were convinced by the fallacious interpretations. It was not the character and ideas of Jesus that won him adherents in those days.

And so the followers of Jesus came to be known as *Christians,* just as the native Americans came to be called Indians, and this misnomer, like the other, has come down to confuse thought ever since. It may be too late now to change this; but it is hard to find any person in history less

like a Jewish "Christ" than was the lowly and democratic Nazarene carpenter, or any people less like Jewish zealots than are we, the so-called "Christians" of the 20th century.

Still, the notion of the Christ was too vague to spoil Mark's matchless portrait of the Nazarene. There are, of course, inevitable exaggerations and legendary decorations in the picture, and there is one long discourse, called by scholars "The Little Apocalypse," which although it may contain a few words of Jesus, is easily recognized as merely another fragment from the vast output of lurid, prophetic pictures which the Jewish imagination of the period painted in such vivid colors.

V

AFTER the gospel of Mark had been in circulation a few years, two men whom we call Matthew and Luke each found himself in possession of additional valuable materials relating to the life and teachings of Jesus, and particularly a book that contained what we now know as "The Sermon on the Mount" and other sayings of his. Accordingly each of these men, but each unaware of what the other was doing, determined to prepare a new, enlarged, and revised edition of Mark's Life of Christ.

So the gospels of Matthew and Luke came into being, each based on Mark's work and repeating most of what he tells, each appropriating material from the

same book of discourses, but each adding unique matter of inestimable value from unknown sources. Each begins his history with a story of the birth and infancy of Jesus, and closes with an account of incidents following his resurrection. But here they contradict each other in almost every detail, and it is plain that these stories, beautiful as they are—and they are the most beautiful in all literature—are not real history but are creations of the poetic imagination.

VI

MARK'S original little book of Good News and the two enlarged and revised editions of it put out by Matthew and Luke all agree in their fundamental thesis, that Jesus is "the Christ," the long-hoped-for ideal King of the Jews. There is no suggestion that he was a preëxistent heavenly being, the Creator of the world, who came temporarily to earth. It is true that each of the two enlarged editions contains a story of his miraculous birth. But then Hebrew history had begun with the miraculous birth of Isaac and all down through the centuries the miraculous births of great leaders, such as Samuel and Samson, had been a matter of course. John the Baptist had been mi-

raculously born. Miraculous birth made a man great, but it did not make him super-human.

The thing to rejoice in as we read these first three gospels is that preconceptions of the nature of the Messiah were too vague to spoil the history. The Messiahship of Jesus was a conclusion from the facts; the facts related were not invented in order to support the theory. It must be confessed, however, that here and there in Matthew and Luke, and sometimes even in Mark, are passages that clearly foreshadow theological developments which were bound to come.

VII

AND now an astounding thing happened. A man called John—no one knows who he was—living probably in Ephesus, woke up to the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth had been no less than God himself incarnate!

Accordingly he determined to rewrite "The Life of Christ" on the same general plan followed by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but with the new aim of making it "a page from the biography of God"!

To us, with scientific minds of the 20th century, fact and truth are the same. Not so to this mystic philosopher. The sordid facts of history were nothing to him. The details given by the earlier biographers were but so many dramatic

"properties" to be moved about on the stage as might suit the high spriritual purposes of the play. In this new gospel we should see God, the omniscient and omnipotent, walking about in Galilee or Jerusalem, in shape like a man, but with no human limitations. The climax of the drama would be a bloody sacrifice whereby incarnate God would atone for the sins of mankind and cast down the Devil, who had been up to that time Prince of the World.

It takes our breath away to think of the daring of such a plan. But more amazing than the audacity of the plan has been its success. For it is a fact that this mystical genius actually produced a book which took precedence of the older gospels and has exerted a more potent charm over a larger number of noble minds for a longer period of time than any other book.

Readers imagine that they find here a sweetness, a tenderness, a spiritual suggestiveness, an intimacy of heavenly friendship beyond anything else in literature. Revivalists preaching to convert sinners take their texts from John. Pastors at the bedsides of the dying are asked to read from John. Over open coffins mourners are comforted with sweet assurances from John. To most Christians this book is the heart of the Bible.

Closely scanned, however, this charm is found to depend partly on beautiful rhetoric, but mainly on concessions to certain subtle weaknesses of human nature—the love of mystery, curiosity regarding the occult, aversion to exact thinking, the satisfaction of being in the inner circle, the ease of a salvation that depends merely on accepting something done for us by another and which does not stress the duties we are to perform so

much as the advantages we are to receive. It is largely the ideas that the real Jesus did not hold which make this gospel better loved than the other gospels.

VIII

JOHN retold the story of Nazarene Jesus with the intent to make it worthy of incarnate God. He left out incidents related by Mark if they were unsuitable for God, such as the temptation in the wilderness, the agony in the garden, the despair on the cross. He enlarged the miracles to prove omnipotence. At every turn he showed omniscience. Jesus could not learn anything, for his "I am" included consciousness of the days of Abraham and of the abyss of time before the world was. If he was to be betrayed, he himself selected a devil long beforehand, included him among the twelve disciples, made him one of the elect, and finally gave him the signal when to do the betraying.

Thus the earthly life of Jesus was transformed into a masquerade. Judas was "cast" for the villain's part in the play. If Judas or Caiaphas or Pilate had refused to commit the sin assigned to him, Jesus could not have taken away the sin of the world. No wonder that thoughtful readers find an insoluble problem in the moral responsibility of Judas. The author makes John the Baptist speak the prologue and announce St. Paul's theory of the atonement as the key to the play before the curtain rises on the first scene of the first act.

To God there is no morning nor evening, but always "sacred, high, eternal noon." Consequently there could not be in this gospel, as in the others, progress to climaxes. In the other gospels it was not until about the middle of the action that Peter, the keenest-minded, woke up to the fact that Jesus was the Christ. In John

that fact is common talk from the start. Andrew knows it and tells it to Peter before Peter has ever seen Jesus. Nathanael affirms it at the first interchange of greetings. Early in the story the whole party goes to Samaria—of all places in the world!—for the Samaritans would have no dealings with the Jews, and there Jesus proclaims himself as the Jewish Christ, and is joyfully welcomed as such, though what Samaritans can have hoped from a Jewish Christ we cannot conjecture.

It is by his divine omniscience and omnipotence that Jesus wins adherents, not by revealing the tenderness and sympathy of his heart. Nathanael believes because Jesus has seen him under the fig tree. The woman of Samaria believes because Jesus knows that she has had five husbands.

In the earlier gospels Jesus refuses to

do any "signs" to prove his power. His miracles are merely the responses of a loving heart to the incidental appeals of misery. Here the miracles are "signs" —that is, scientific demonstrations of omnipotence—and the whole appeal is based on them. They are made dazzling enough for that purpose. The first one is a chemical miracle, the changing of one hundred and fifty gallons of water into wine, not for the relief of suffering, but purely for display. And this display of glory made sure the faith of his newly enlisted little group of disciples.

But the crowning demonstration is the raising of Lazarus. In Mark's simple story we are told that once Jesus raised to life a little girl who had just died—in fact Jesus said she was not dead—and this was the only case of the kind that Mark knew of. In John we have the raising of a corpse four days dead and al-

ready smelling of putrefaction. Jesus had purposely stayed away two days longer than necessary until he should have a fit "subject" to demonstrate on. Not only is life restored but the resuscitated man is able to walk out of the tomb while still bound hand and foot and blindfolded. No more astounding demonstration of power can be conceived.

IX

THE author makes facts of history and allegories of philosophy melt into each other.

In that last touching interview beside the Lake of Galilee Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him and three times charges him to care for his sheep. Then he says to him, "Follow me," and the story goes on "Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following." This startles us; for we had not supposed that in saying, "Follow me," Jesus referred to an actual walk along the shore. It is not physical following that is suggested. Nor did the author himself think of physical following. The whole was merely a picture in his mind. And yet

Peter looked back and saw John following!

To improve his story the author felt free to shift the historical events that the earlier evangelists had told. The cleansing of the temple, which they put at the very end of Jesus' public life, John moved over to the beginning, because Jesus must from the first assert his full authority. The crucifixion of Jesus which the others had placed on the day after the Passover John brought forward to the exact day of the Passover so that the "Lamb of God" might die at the hour prescribed for the death of the Passover lambs.

Mary and Martha whom Luke pictured as living in the north John brought down and placed in Bethany so that Jesus might have a home in the outskirts of Jerusalem. Luke had told how in the house of a Pharisee called Simon in Galilee a sinful woman had rained tears on

the *feet* of Jesus and had anointed them with ointment. Mark had told how in the house of Simon the leper in Bethany "a woman" had come and had poured perfume on the *head* of Jesus. John conflates these two stories and improves on them. He places the scene in the house of Mary and Martha in Bethany, makes Mary the woman, and has her anoint Jesus' *feet.*

The other gospels had told of the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane by a party of Jewish temple servants under the guidance of Judas. John wants to emphasize the omnipotence of Jesus and the absolute voluntariness of his sacrifice. So he places at the disposal of Judas a battalion of Roman soldiers commanded by a military tribune, an officer about equal in rank to a colonel! The troops march up to Jesus but at once fall prostrate before him and Jesus banters

them with their helplessness. A Roman army could not arrest him except by his own consent. Neither could Roman soldiers kill him. When he was ready he breathed out his life. Death for God could not be anything but suicide.

X

MARK'S plan was to tell an incident which gave occasion for some light-giving sentences of Jesus. This anecdotal style had become the accepted form for a gospel. Matthew and Luke followed it. John had to follow it. But he was a theologian, not a historian, and least of all a dramatist.

Still he must begin his sections dramatically. We are in a theatre and the stage is set and actors enter. But, before we are aware, stage and actors have faded away. We are in the lecture room of a theological seminary with a professor reading us a lecture. No one can tell where to stop using quotation marks around the words of the actors. The ed-

itors who print the New Testament with the words of Jesus in red do not know whether to assign to him the favorite text "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," or to leave it to the professor.

The supposed events are symbolical of theological doctrines and the reader is uncertain whether he is expected to regard them as having happened. After Jesus was dead on the cross a Roman soldier "with his spear pierced his side and immediately there came forth blood and water." The wound was large enough for St. Thomas to thrust his hand into. That is, it was large enough to split the whole heart. That two distinct streams of blood and water could come from a heart thus ruptured is anatomically and physiologically unthinkable. The author did not so think of it. He was not interested in physical facts, but in alle-

gorical pictures. Here are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.

The opening of the eyes of the man born blind is the allegory of Jesus' light-giving power. The resurrection of Lazarus is the allegory of his life-giving power.

In each case the supposed event furnishes merely the text for the theological dissertation. The incident itself is never closed and we never know how it resulted. In the twelfth chapter certain Greeks wish to see Jesus. Philip and Andrew guide them to him. At once Philip and Andrew and the Greeks fade away and are not mentioned again. The theological lecture proceeds.

The earlier writers, whose scene was Galilee, got a change of subject by having Jesus cross to the other side of the lake. John adopts the same rhetorical device. But he so far forgets reality that he has

Jesus go to the other side of the lake *from Jerusalem*. The little lake was sixty miles north of Jerusalem and neither the east nor the west shore was the other side from that city. Commentators have tried to explain this confusion by assuming that the pages of the gospel have become shuffled or that some page has dropped out. But no such explanation is needed. Here is merely another instance of combined vividness and unreality.

The author's obliviousness of history finds startling illustration in his regular use of the name "the Jews" as designating the enemies of Jesus. He is so far away from the actual scenes that he forgets that Jesus was a Jew and that all his friends were Jews as well as his enemies. To speak of the enemies of Jesus as "the Jews" is as odd as to speak of the political enemies of Woodrow Wilson as "the

Americans." This is the language of sectarians in Ephesus long after the time of Jesus, not that of one of his Galilean associates.

XI

THIS author's idea of God is the most stupendous structure in the whole history of religion. Although it depends for its depth and mystery on the principle of first affirming and then denying everything, and thus setting aside all the laws of thought recognized by logicians, it has for that very reason a charm of elusiveness that has captivated mystics.

The one God exists in three. Theologians explain that the word *Person* is not here used in the sense that it is when applied to Peter and James and John. Really the author does not use the word Person at all, but simply talks of three who are as distinct as Peter, James, and John. Any two of them can give inde-

pendent concurrent testimony to a fact and prove it in court just as any two men can.

These three Gods have all the mutual relations that Peter, James and John have. They keep company, love one another, talk together, impart information, give and receive gifts, collaborate. They separate and come together. The Third Person cannot come down from heaven to earth until the Second Person finishes his work and goes up from earth to heaven. Comparatively little is said of the Third Person. The great purpose of the book is to set forth the nature of the Second. From beginning to end Jesus is made to talk incessantly about himself. This becomes distressing to the reader. It seems to argue a lack of good breeding. When God became man did he not become a gentleman?

XII

It was the Second Person who changed into a man and became Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Christ. The author's conception of the Second Person is that he sustains the same relation to the First Person that any man's image in a mirror sustains to the man himself. He is a mere reflection. Of himself he knows nothing, has nothing, does nothing. The Father shows him what to do, grants him the elect, glorifies him. The Father gives him all things and does nothing except through the Son; the Son has always shared the Father's glory and after his earthly work returns to it while the Spirit takes up the earthly administration.

This amazing notion of God rapidly took hold on Christian thinking and supplanted the simple Hebrew monotheism of the rest of the New Testament. St. Paul's development of the notion of the Christ had advanced as far as Arianism —that is, that Jesus was a great pre-existent created being—but it had left the idea of the one God as pure as it was held by Matthew, Mark and Luke. John's theory made Jesus incarnate God. By the time of the great Council of Nicæa, held by the emperor Constantine in A. D. 325, Trinitarianism, represented by Athanasius, had reached strength enough to win recognition as Orthodoxy, and from that date with merciless severity it crushed all questioning wherever it might from time to time spring up. It remains the religion of the vast bulk of Christendom today.

Robert Browning, in that masterpiece,

"A Death in the Desert," has put into the mouth of the dying John the words:

"I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it."

Certainly it solves them. It answers every question first, "Yes," and then, "No." Jesus has and has not every conceivable predicate. He has localized omnipresence, inferior equality, separable identity, is Creator and creature in one, finite-infinite and every other imaginable pair of contradictories. When a person is assumed to be superior to all the laws of thought he becomes, by that very assumption, unthinkable.

XIII

MARK'S idea of the work of Jesus was that of imparting to human hearts the inclusive love that serves, and the freedom to use one's own mind. It is love to God, love to children, sympathy with the sick, generosity to the poor, friendship to sinners, holy democratic comradeship with all classes, freedom to do the loving, sensible thing anywhere on any day, even on God's day and in spite of the Bible. At the end Jesus was crucified. But Mark thought of that, as we think of the assassination of Lincoln, as merely a cruel thing that happened to occur, showing the dreadful passions of the time.

In John the chief mission of Jesus is to

die. All else is purely prefatory. The main action is not his work among men; it is his mysterious sacrifice and conquest of the Devil. John the Baptist points him out as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He takes the sin away not by showing men the life of love and free intelligence, but by the sacrifice of his own material body.

The author here, just as everywhere else, has two incompatible ideas to harmonize. Jesus as God cannot suffer, and yet it is his sufferings that purchase our salvation. He was not killed by the crucifixion. He, by his own will, gave up his physical life. The spear did not pierce his side until after he was dead. He never felt that wound. So while the death of Jesus is the one saving thing, it loses the agony and becomes a masquerade.

Up to that time in history the Devil

had been the prince of this world. The non-elect were his children. Darkness reigned. The death of the Second Person of the Trinity ended the power of the Devil and saved the elect. The elect, the sheep, have received from the Father the power to recognize the voice of the Shepherd and so find their way into the fold of salvation.

There are verses in this gospel which sound much broader and tenderer than this scheme, for here everything is affirmed and denied. Jesus if lifted up on the cross will draw *all* men unto him. Yes, but no one can come unless the *Father* draws him. The favorite text of evangelists is John, third chapter and sixteenth verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." That sounds wide and free; but we must

remember that the word *whosoever* is not in the original Greek, and that only the elect *can* believe and that Jesus says that he does not pray for the world.

On the whole there is little love or solicitude for outside sinners shown in this gospel. It is the elect sheep alone who are provided for. The Lamb of God did not really take away the sin of the world but only the sin of the elect.

XIV

THE author was strongest in writing mystical discourses, and at his weakest in dialogue. For he was no dramatist, and then not even the greatest of dramatists, not even Shakespeare himself, could have invented suitable speeches for God. So in this gospel, alone of the four, we find flat remarks attributed to Jesus. Some of these flat sayings occur even in the discourses.

At the marriage in Cana the wine ran short. Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine." Here is a situation invented to introduce Jesus as omnipotent God. It is the opening of his public career. But as God he must resent human suggestions and so he repels his

mother with a rude rebuff. Still, as ideal man, he must do as his mother says. She knows this, and ignoring the rebuff, passes the word to the servants to be ready to take his orders. Six large jars of water are immediately changed into wine. This incident is somehow hard to present edifyingly to American Sunday school scholars. A course of lessons on the gospel of John was used last year in Congregational Sunday schools, but the authors of the course decided to omit the story of the first miracle of incarnate God. They substituted for it a selection from *Matthew* which teaches obedience to law!

Just as the story of the wedding at Cana is marred by the necessity of making Jesus, as God, disrespectful to his human mother, so the story of the raising of Lazarus is marred by the necessity of making Jesus, as Lord of Life, angry in

the presence of his enemy, Death. The King James version conceals this, but it is very plain in the Greek where a coarse word for indignation is twice used, a word which properly denotes the rage of an animal.

XV

It is not necessary to review the long list of flat sayings. One of the most puzzling is in the discourse regarding the Good Shepherd. Jesus is made to say, "All that ever came before me were thieves and robbers." He seems to be comparing himself with earlier religious leaders, and the Jewish audience would naturally think of Moses and the Prophets. Whom can he have intended?

The most surprising of all these flat sayings is in the tenth chapter. After a long and bitter debate "The Jews" see clearly his point and say, "You, a man, are making yourself God." This is the sort of climax for which every true teacher longs—the moment when the

scholars finally see the point at issue and themselves state it and wait only for yes or no. The deity of Jesus is supposed to be the one sublime assertion toward which the whole book moves. But what does John have Jesus reply? He has him quote a verse from an old Psalm in which the Hebrew word *God* is applied as an official title to some human rulers who are rebuked for injustice. From this he gives his interlocutors to understand that in styling himself "Son of God" he had claimed nothing that might not be true even of bad men!

Once in the course of a debate with the Jerusalem crowd Jesus exclaims, "Father, glorify thy name!" And then the Father, who is conceived as an old Emperor living upstairs in the sky right over Jerusalem, thunders down to the Crown Prince, "I have glorified it and will again glorify it." For stark polytheism, for

childish cosmography and for dramatic flatness this passage surpasses everything else in the book. One shudders in reading it and wonders how the author dared to write it. How astonishing that the vast body of Christians today find in this nothing shocking! They accept it as the straightforward account of a real historic occurrence.

XVI

THE imaginary discourses of Jesus in this gospel have a verbal charm that wins emotional readers, but being made up of generalities and abstractions, they give little real information. Generally they give misinformation. Take for example the much-loved discourse concerning the Good Shepherd. The comparison of God's care over his people to that of a shepherd for his flock is a familiar one in the Old Testament, and in Palestine it was peculiarly natural, appropriate, and beautiful. But here Jesus is made to say "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." That is not what a shepherd does. An intelligent shepherd would no more lay down his life for his

sheep than a swineherd would die for his pigs. The author perverts this beautiful Old Testament figure in order to teach a theological theory, namely, that Jesus does not lead men like a shepherd, but saves them by his death, unlike a shepherd. It was by a bloody sacrifice that the claims of the Devil or of God—John never says which—were met. On what principle of law or of morals such an atonement could avail for men John never tells us.

In support of this doctrine that the main mission of Jesus was to die, John misuses another supposed analogy. He makes Jesus say, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit." This is untrue both in botany and in human affairs. Every farmer's boy in Galilee could have told him that when the seed dies in the ground through unseasonable

wet or cold there will be no crop at all. Any Jewish boy in any synagogue school could have told him that Moses and David and Judas Maccabæus and the others who built the Hebrew nation did not do it by dying. There is no such principle as is here announced. The focusing of the attention of Christians on the supposed sacrifice of Jesus and the belief that what he did for us was to pay the penalty for our sins, rather than to show us how to avoid sinning, has lowered the morals of all Christendom. Imagine incarnate God making a mistake in botany!

XVII

It is often said that this author was intensely loyal to Jesus. No doubt. But the word "loyalty" must here be interpreted in a peculiar sense. John undertook to glorify Jesus by making him wholly other than he was. He made a god of him. He left out the simple ethical ideas that Jesus loved and he substituted for them theological dogmas which Jesus would have rejected. Instead of the free fatherly forgiveness which Jesus attributed to God, John introduced a bloody physical expiation of sin. For obedient activity which Jesus emphasized as the way of salvation, John substituted belief in a theological theory.

Yes, he was "loyal to Jesus"; but when he had gotten through with his book he had transformed the religion of Jesus from loving service into blind acceptance of an incomprehensible mystical theology and material sacraments.

Suppose that when Lord Charnwood set out to write his new life of Abraham Lincoln he had said to himself: "The time has come to dismiss the sordid facts —the baggy trousers and the old 'stove-pipe' hat. I will not mention the Gettysburg address nor the second Inaugural. I will have Lincoln hasten to Appomattox to receive in person the sword of General Lee, and I will compose for him a long address supposed to have been delivered in Ford's Theatre just before the assassination. Above all things I will keep him eulogizing himself. Thus I will present the ultimate universal Lincoln, the Lincoln of the American spirit-

ual consciousness." If Lord Charnwood had done this in writing the life of Lincoln he would have done just what St. John did in writing the life of Jesus.

XVIII

THREE distinct views of the gospel of John are now held:—

I. This is a straightforward story of actual facts. Jesus did and said the things here recorded. Consequently we find in this book the profoundest truths of the Christian religion.

II. The book is a fictitious story. The events did not occur. Jesus did not say and do what is here set down. Consequently we do not find here a true interpretation of his personality or of his ideas.

III. The book is a fictitious story. The events did not occur. Jesus did not say and do what is here set down. And yet these imaginary events and these things that he did not say give us a truer

and deeper understanding of him than what he really did say and do.

The first of these views is the traditional one and is still the prevailing one. The second view has gradually forced itself on the conviction of many careful scholars. The third view is an attempt to combine both of the others. Those who hold it are scholars and know that the book does not tell facts, and yet being theologians they cannot bring themselves to give up the old theology. So they hold the amazing belief that on these fictitious statements we must base our most solid convictions!

To put it more clearly, these men of the third view hold that when God came to earth and was incarnate and walked about and talked to men, he could not say nor do things that worthily expressed him. He could not adequately show his omnipotence and omniscience, and his

talk was mainly of things merely ethical —the Sermon on the Mount and such parables as the Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son. It remained for an unknown writer, a century later, to invent miracles worthy of incarnate God and to put into his mouth theological discourses which must be for us the essence of religion!

XIX

WHAT are the secrets of the charm of this fascinating book, a charm that makes it more loved than Matthew or Mark or Luke?

The first charm is in its limpid style. It reads like a child's primer. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Children, beginning to read, as President Coolidge did, at Grandmother's knee, read of course from John. This is the easiest book in the Bible to translate into other languages. While profoundly—unfathomably—philosophical, it uses no philosophical term but one, and that only in the opening sentence. After that everything is expressed in simple meta-

phors; light, life, birth, bread, water, blood, sheep, vine, and so on.

The second charm of the book is in these abounding metaphors. A metaphor suggests something but does not define it. It awakens the imagination but does not fetter it. A metaphor is the delight of loose thinkers. Each reader according to his own likes assigns a value to the algebraic symbol. It is like music; it stirs the heart but does not bind the head. It forces on us no unwelcome proposition. It shocks no prejudice. No one, in the interviews with Jesus in this gospel, ever learned of any concrete duty. Nicodemus learned that there must be a mysterious, inexplicable birth from above which the Spirit of God would control. He was not told that he ought to do anything, or could do anything, about it. The woman of Samaria learned that Jesus would give her water; she did not learn

how to be a true wife. All that was required of anybody was assent to some metaphor or abstraction.

Depth and suggestiveness are secured by the simple expedient of mixed metaphor. Words are used first in a physical sense and then immediately slip into a metaphysical one. Imagination delights in this flickering of the picture out of the world of sense into the world of spirit and back again. Just as there by the Lake of Galilee we are not certain whether Peter's "following" is with his real feet along the shore or with his soul in martyrdom—and we do not care to know—so often space and the non-spatial, time and the timeless melt into one another. Jesus tells the sorrowing circle of disciples that he must leave them and go to the Father. It seems real geographical departure from Jerusalem. But then he himself is the Way, and the Fa-

ther is here *in* him. They have only to look at him to see the Father to whom he is going. Was it physical departure or was it not? Jesus, speaking to Martha about dead Lazarus, says, "He who believes in me even though he dies will live, and no one who lives and believes in me will ever die." Here is a play on the two senses of the word die, using the favorite method of paradox and metaphor.

Another charm is in the recurring contradictions. Contradictions stimulate thought and challenge the reader to find the double or triple sense. "No one has ever seen God," but, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." "If I testify regarding myself, my testimony is not true," but, "Even if I witness to myself, my witness is true." The Father "has committed all judgment to the Son," but, "I judge no one."

The most potent charm of all is the pic-

ture of the intimacy of the inner circle around the Crown Prince of Heaven. The members of this little coterie have no idea why or when they were elected. They find themselves there in the heavenly light and peace of that upper room, while outside in the night are the sheep that do not know the Shepherd's voice, the children of the Devil who are not drawn, the blind world for which Jesus does not even pray. It is like the comfort of being in the warm bright cabin of a staunch ship at sea on a black and stormy night when frailer craft are foundering.

In this book the assurance of immortality and of the abode after death with Jesus in the place prepared in our Father's house is more distinct than in the other gospels. There is winning tenderness in the wording of these promises. And there is the promise of the Comfor-

ter (the English word is tenderer than the Greek word) and the promise of peace. Troubled hearts turn again and again to these passages.

The secret of the charm therefore is that everything is so pictorial and simple and intimate, and at the same time so unfathomable and indefinite. The only duty insisted on—aside from love to the other members of the circle—is acceptance of a series of metaphors which suggest beautiful pictures that hold the mind down to nothing. Preachers love the indefinite generalities of this gospel, such as "I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly." This specifies nothing, antagonizes no opinion nor practice, violates no prejudice, requires no action, disturbs no one's conscience. How unlike the Golden Rule! When a man tells me that he has come "to bear witness to the truth" he tells me nothing.

If Copernicus had merely borne witness to the truth we should have learned no astronomy; if Darwin had merely borne witness to the truth we should have learned nothing about evolution.

XX

THE simple, sublime religion of Jesus —faith in one God, our loving heavenly Father; love to everyone; greatness only through service; the free use of our own intelligence—was as far beyond the apprehension of the theologians of the first century as the fact of a wholly new world was beyond the grasp of Columbus. So two men of towering genius proceeded to clothe it in pagan conceptions.

St. Paul determined to know no more "Christ after the flesh." That is, he had no use for what the Nazarene carpenter had said and done. He knew nothing but "Christ and him crucified." That is, the death of the Messiah became for him the starting point of theological theory. St. John accepted this theory but he went

a step farther than St. Paul. He transformed Jesus himself into incarnate God and wrote a fictitious story of his earthly words and deeds in which Jesus appears as a theological lecturer.

Was there any harm in this? Well, both of these ideas were purely pagan. The notion that men's sins can be atoned for by bloody sacrifice seems basal in primeval heathenism. The notion that God is three is an attempt to combine polytheism with nominal monotheism. It is confusing to the last degree. Most Christians nowadays believe in an older God and a younger God who are as distinct as George V and the Prince of Wales.

By this gospel the sweetest and most heroic human life ever lived was converted into a masquerade of God, and the noblest human person was changed into God's mask.

In this gospel the miraculous element, instead of being merely incidental, as in the others, is raised to the nth degree and made the fundamental and final proof of Jesus' claims. Strangely, this book which demands faith in Jesus on the cold, scientific ground of his dazzling displays of physical power has won the title of "the spiritual gospel" away from the earlier gospels which base their appeal on the gentleness and lowliness of his heart.

In this gospel we are taught that from eternity men were divided into two classes, the elect and the non-elect, and that their characters flow from their destinies, not their destinies from their characters. The salvation of men is not represented as a victory of intelligence and good will in their minds but as something purchased by the bloody death of God. The elect get the benefit of this salvation simply by "believing" the theory, and the

power to believe is the consequence of their election.

Instead of preaching about the Golden Rule and the Good Samaritan and love for children and mutual forgiveness and other topics that interested Jesus, the church has now for nearly two thousand years insisted mainly upon belief in Paul's and John's theological theories. Has there been no harm in this?

XXI

In recognizing the harm in the book and avoiding that harm, we do not have to give up any part of the legitimate charm. The author loved Jesus and tried to honor him. He expressed in matchless language some precious truths. These are eternally ours in spite of the dreaming.

It is true for us still that "God is Spirit" and that "The truth will make you free," even if Jesus did not speak just those sentences. The truth is now freeing us from this author's confusions. We have a right to the peace which Jesus left to us and the sure faith in immortality, the expectation of going to the "many abiding places" in our Father's house.

And now deeper study has given us back Jesus, the real historical human Nazarene, a thousand times more precious than any flickering Incarnation who is and is not anything and everything.

What a joy to get back to the simplicity of faith in one God, our heavenly Father, to whom we may pray directly as Jesus taught us in "The Lord's Prayer," without making our petition in his or any other person's name!

What a joy to get a religion without obscurities and to find that Christianity is not assent to metaphysical theories but is only doing the will of God just as Jesus said it was in the climax of The Sermon on the Mount!

XXII

THE Christians of the first century thought that they were at the end of earthly history. In a few days, or years at the most, the closing catastrophe would fall. We, twenty centuries later, realize that our race is still only on the threshold of history. The World War was but a preliminary incident in clearing away obstructive tyrannies and barriers. The large achievements of mankind are yet to come.

The world is fast becoming one community. All men talk together across the oceans and continents, enjoy the same music, see the same pictures, share the same civilization. Science has only just

begun to subdue the earth and exploit its boundless resources. Every day brings the announcement of the finding of some new Aladdin's lamp, and we are thrilled by "the vision of the world and all the wonder that will be."

But all this wealth and power will be only the means of frightful horrors and mutual destruction unless the hearts of men can be made like the heart of Jesus. He is the only hope of the world. Ambition, pride, greed, passion, race prejudice can be tamed by no one but Jesus.

How shall we present him and his gospel to mankind? In terms of Paul's rabbinic entanglements? In terms of John's mystical obscurities and endless contradictions? Is Jesus a Jewish Messiah? Is he a Hindoo Incarnation? Two thousand years of failure thunder, "No!" Our immeasurable love to Jesus himself,

our immeasurable compassion for the unshepherded millions compel us to do our utmost to dispel the mists that have so long obscured the Light of the World.

XXIII

So far, our missionaries, in carrying the gospel to men benighted, have always offered it in theological forms which have for centuries bred, and always must breed, divisions and hates. But if all men—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Brahmins, Confucians and the rest—are to unite in a world religion it can be only that simple and self-evident religion of the Nazarene carpenter presented in the first three gospels. There will be the Four Principles of right living:—

I. Inclusive love
II. Humble service
III. Freedom
IV. Common sense

And behind these four principles of living will stand the three great beliefs:—

I. God is like men only greater.
II. Men are like God only smaller.
III. God and men can find happiness only in eternal mutual love.

Possibly the "Jesus religion" of the future will not be called Christianity. That name originated in mistake and has, for all these centuries, stood for the religion *about* Jesus—metaphysical, theological, polytheistic, ritualistic, ascetic, monkish, ecclesiastical, sectarian, tyrannical, inquisitorial. What we need is the genuine religion *of* Jesus—simple, sensible, serviceable, peace-making, mind-liberating, heart-comforting, hope-inspiring, world-redeeming.

THE END

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